

The New York Times Company

The New York Times

November 11, 2001, Sunday, Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section 14LI; Page 3; Column 1; Long Island Weekly Desk

Junior R.O.T.C. Cadets Face Hard Choices **By DAVID KOEPPPEL**

WEEKDAY mornings at 6:15, 15-year-old Christina DeLeon arrives at Hempstead High School in her green camouflage uniform to begin 45 minutes of calisthenics and marching drill.

The company's student commander barks orders under the watchful eye of Donald Moore Jr., who retired from the Marines as a major and, with his booming voice and shaved head, appears to have lost none of his formidability. Mr. Moore signed on to become the first military instructor of Hempstead's Marine Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps program, which the high school established in September 2000.

Hempstead is the newest of Long Island's eight J.R.O.T.C. programs, which attempt to give high school students an early military education but don't require a commitment to join the armed forces. All four branches of the military have programs on Long Island; for example, Brentwood's J.R.O.T.C. program is affiliated with the Air Force, Lindenhurst's with the Marines, Wyandanch's with the Army and Riverhead's with the Navy.

Each program is tailored to the service with which it is aligned; Navy classes include maritime heritage, navigation and seamanship, while Air Force classes include the history of aviation and aerospace science. But local J.R.O.T.C. representatives say the programs' main goal is to teach leadership, citizenship and self-discipline.

The events of Sept. 11 have inspired some J.R.O.T.C. students to become even more committed to their dream of military service,

and one of the instructors reported that the cadets were now more accepted by their peers, who were sometimes skeptical about the clean-cut teenagers in their crisply pressed uniforms.

"The Berkeley attitude is gone," said Bill Grigonis, another retired Marine major who is the senior instructor at the Southold-Mattituck Navy J.R.O.T.C. program. "No one is making fun of these kids now. Everyone's glad to have them."

But some cadets confided that fears of a prolonged war on terrorism have caused them to reconsider their plans to enlist. Some expressed fear of death and said the reality of life in the armed forces was a frightening prospect.

Taneka Braithwaite, 17, a Hempstead High senior who had considered a military career, dropped out of the school's J.R.O.T.C. several days after Sept. 11, citing her religious convictions, objections from her parents and the terrorist attacks. She turned down a Navy R.O.T.C. scholarship that would have financed her college education in return for four years of military service.

"Sept. 11 helped make my decision final," she said. "Seeing what happened made me realize I needed to enjoy my life more and that I had to spend more time practicing my religion."

Patchogue-Medford High School's Air Force J.R.O.T.C. instructor, Robert Atkinson, spent 19 years in the Marines. While he supports students who want to enter the armed forces, he counsels them about the pitfalls.

"I tell them they're getting a job that involves physical danger," the 54-year-old retired colonel and Vietnam veteran said. "I

don't want to see them get all gung-ho like they're going to a Saturday nightclub. It's a dangerous job."

Before Sept. 11, J.R.O.T.C. enrollment on Long Island had been rising, reflecting a national trend. Wyandanch's program had 28 cadets in 1996. Now it has 110. Patchogue has 145 cadets this year, up from 81 in 1996.

At Southold High School, the cadets interviewed showed little doubt or fear about their futures in the military. Dressed in immaculate black Navy uniforms, many displayed medals earned for academic honors and community service. The company has 101 students from three different schools, Southold, Mattituck and Greenport.

Two Mattituck students -- Sean Pillai and Christopher Symczak, both 17 -- are seeking Navy R.O.T.C. scholarships or appointments to the United States Naval Academy. Their company commander, Lauren Hubbard, also 17 and from Southold, is forgoing college and has already enlisted in the Navy's delayed entry program. He is scheduled to report for basic training next September.

Mr. Grigonis, 38, was a J.R.O.T.C. cadet and graduated from Southold High School in 1981. His 20 years in the Marines took him all over the world, but he said he was excited to return to his alma mater as a naval science instructor in September. Like the other instructors, his salary is split between the school district and the service to which the program is affiliated.

Back in those early post-Vietnam years, Mr. Grigonis recalled, J.R.O.T.C. got little respect and the program went through eight instructors when he was a cadet.

"Thankfully the culture of America has changed," he said.

Maybe not so much. At a recent morning meeting, some of the Hempstead J.R.O.T.C. students were wearing uniforms while others were dressed in baggy pants and T-shirts.

"Everything's a fashion statement at this school," said Miss DeLeon. "More people would join if the uniform had bellbottoms."

Mr. Moore said Miss DeLeon is one of his most dedicated cadets, possibly a future company commander. But before joining J.R.O.T.C. last year, she was someone who by her own admission was heading in the wrong direction.

She said she was having difficulty adjusting to her parents' divorce and frequently cut classes. When her best friend became pregnant, Miss DeLeon said her mother, Virginia, began pushing her to join the J.R.O.T.C. program, hoping it would give her the structure she was lacking.

Now she wakes up at 5 a.m. every day, and "yes ma'am" and "no sir" have become regular parts of her speech.

"People told me I'm crazy, that joining the company isn't worth it," Miss DeLeon said. "Well, it's been worth it to me."

But some instructors stressed that while the programs can help troubled adolescents, it's not a dumping ground for wayward teenagers.

"This program is not going to magically instill discipline, it's not structured for remediation," said Dwight Becherer, the instructor of the J.R.O.T.C. program at William Floyd High School in Mastic Beach.

Mr. Becherer added that while the program was a godsend for some youngsters, others refuse to take it seriously and drop the elective after freshman year. Those who continue with the program, often credit J.R.O.T.C. with transforming their lives.

A Hempstead cadet, Jorge Alguera, 17, is planning to enlist in the Marines when he turns 18, and his classmate, Elvis Moricete, 17, is already in the Marine delayed entry program and reports for duty after graduation.

Mr. Alguera, an immigrant from Costa Rica who came to New York at age 11, said he wants to serve as a role model for native-born Americans to demonstrate that even

someone born outside the United States can faithfully serve this country.

Lawrence Taylor, 16, a Wyandanch High School junior and an Army J.R.O.T.C. cadet, immigrated to the United States from Jamaica in 1998 and cringes when other students

criticize his dream to become an Air Force pilot because he isn't a citizen yet.

"I couldn't believe that people still thought like that," he said. This country has given me a place to eat and a place to live. Why not help the country? I feel like I owe them."